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An Answer to Mike Barnes

Like my colleague, Mike Barnes ("The Invasion Was Right," op-ed, Nov. 9), I had strong initial misgivings about the president's use of military force on Grenada. But unlike him, having toured the island and talked with dozens of U.S. citizens, Marines, Grenadians, representatives of neighboring islands and members of the press, I remain disturbed by the invasion and convinced that the central questions have not been resolved.

Did the threat to U.S. citizens justify the invasion? Did the White House explore other, nonmilitary options to protect our citizens and reduce the threat to other nations in the region? To what extent does the White House view the success of the Grenada operation as a precedent for similar actions in the future?

Mike and I were on the same congressional fact-finding mission to Grenada. We viewed the same evidence, sat through the same briefings, questioned the same people, but we have reached different conclusions.

There is no doubt the entire delegation came away impressed by the positive response of Grenadians to the U.S. action, and the excessive buildup of Soviet and Cuban military supplies. Given what we now know, it is certainly possible to find or construct a justification for the invasion. But I continue to question whether the White House viewed military force as a "first resort" or a "last resort," to be used only if all other options failed.

When President Reagan announced the invasion on the morning of Oct. 25, he said our "paramount concern" was for the safety of U.S. citizens, notably the 600 medical students.

Mike Barnes speaks for our entire delegation when he says U.S. citizens "had every reason to believe that they were in danger." The bloody events of the previous week and the imposition of a 24-hour shoot-on-sight curfew had created an atmosphere of violence and uncertainty.

There is a fine, but very important distinction that must be made here, however. Were the Americans in imminent danger? No. All of the evidence presented to the delegation disclosed no immediate or direct threat to U.S. citizens. Were they in potential danger? Yes. The deteriorating political situation created tension and fear all over the island.

At the White House Tuesday, President Reagan tried to obliterate this important distinction. "It is very easy for some smug know-it-all in a plush, protected quarter to say that you were in no danger," he told some of the medical students. "I have wondered how many of them would have changed places with you."

In 1977 Sen. Paul Tsongas and I were stranded in Ethiopia during the bloody Marxist coup that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie. With the airport closed and no way to leave the country, the danger was great. Every morning we saw bodies all over the streets of Addis Ababa.

Coups and temporary anarchy are an unfortunate fact of life in many nations today, and almost always there are American citizens in potential danger. Where do we draw the line on deciding to invade another country when it appears our citizens are in potential danger?

There is little evidence of any harm or direct threat to U.S. citizens on the island. Indeed, the Sunday before the invasion, U.S. diplomat Kenneth Kurze returned from Grenada and said, "We have not recommended they leave." It can be argued that the actual invasion may have placed our citizens in greater danger than the situation that existed previously.

The administration cited closure of the Pearls Airport as further evidence of potential danger to our people, but the fact is that small planes were taking people out on Monday shortly before the invasion. Several of our allies had arranged with the Military Council for evacuation of their citizens through charter flights; these plans were later scuttled—not by the coup leaders, but by the OECS nations that joined the United States in the invasion.

There is no evidence that the White House explored fully any options short of invasion to protect and evacuate our citizens. If this was, as Reagan now insists, a "rescue operation," why did we not first exhaust all possibilities of an orderly evacuation or Entebbe-style rescue?

The advancing Marines did not secure the 225 students at the Grand Anse medi-

cal school campus until after nearly two days of fierce fighting. This fact sheds light on both the intent of the military operation and the unlikelihood of a hostage situation developing. Many officials have hypothesized the invasion would have gone ahead even if the students and other Americans had been evacuated.

Similarly, there were numerous alternatives short of invasion—ranging from diplomatic action to a blockade—to ensure the security of the OECS nations. The neighboring governments had long been fearful of Grenada's instability, and the subsequent discovery of large stockpiles of Eastern Bloc weapons confirmed their worst suspicions that Grenada could be used to export mischief and insurgency throughout the region.

The OECS ministers were committed to military action for their own reasons, and had actually sought assistance from other countries before they turned to Washington. Thus, it seems clear that the White House and the OECS nations were both proceeding along separate paths toward military invasion. This combination left no opportunity for cooler heads to prevail or for discussion of diplomatic and other means of handling the situation.

Many other troubling questions remain. Last spring, Reagan made much of the military threat posed by the Point Salinas air strip. Yet even the most conservative, pro-American businessmen we met on the island supported the project as an essential commercial facility. Speculation persists about exactly when the invasion was planned and how the timing squares with subsequent events. We discovered U.S. intelligence was inadequate, both before the invasion and during the fighting. The State Department will be hard-pressed to explain our blatant violation of the U.N. and OAS charters, and to rationalize our actions to important allies abroad. The muzzling of the press has left a bitter aftertaste of cynicism and suspicion.

Mike Barnes has concluded that the lesson we should draw from the Grenada invasion is that such an experience should not happen again. I think it shouldn't have happened at all.

The writer is a Democratic representative from Washington.